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ABSTRACT

A group counseling program for mature women students with family responsibilities was established to assist women in adjusting to their new roles as students. Participants were selected after undergoing an individual interview screening and orientation to the nature and purposes of the program. This approach was used to select only those individuals whose needs were similar and who would seem to benefit from this type of activity. Eight participants were ultimately selected. The program consisted of six sessions held on a weekly basis. Session topics included: Developing Listening Skills; The Community College: A New Experience; Friendships and Family; Careers; and Sexuality. A post-session evaluation instrument was completed by each participant, in addition to an individual participant diary kept for each session. All participants felt that the program was valuable. (Author/KM)

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CONTINUING EDUCATION

FOR

WOMEN AT

MATTATUCK COMMUNITY COLLEGE

JC 740 114

Fall Semester 1973

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Counseling Center

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Foreword

Programs for women in continuing education, it has been demonstrated, provide women with an opportunity to be recognized as intelligent human beings with a great deal of potential to offer society, if society will let them. Recognition of individual self-worth and value is an essential ingredient in their self-realization.

It is for these women that this group came into existence, and it is for them I hope it will continue.

Ms. Dorothy E. Andrews

CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR WOMEN
AT MATTATUCK COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Background

The transition by women from a home environment to a school or work environment brings with it many psychological and emotional hurdles. Although their backgrounds may be diverse, women returning to school or work face many common readjustment situations.

Quite frequently, women returning to school attend a community college. The choice of a community college is often based upon one or many of the following factors: convenient location, low tuition fees, smaller student body with potential for more personal contact, and flexibility in offering a wide variety of credit and noncredit programs.

Around the country, college counseling centers for women have discovered that women returning to college share common characteristics such as: feelings of loneliness and guilt due to lack of preparation for a changed life style apart from family and friends; and absence of an acceptable level of self-confidence.

Stereotype societal feelings about women's roles in our society bring feelings of guilt related to family responsibilities when pursuing an education or working. Also included are feelings of non-acceptance by friends and family in seeking to change established roles; inability to find others going through similar situations which give rise to feelings of being unique-different-antisocial. As women redefine their role(s), a strong need exists for supportive group experiences.

Counseling centers, collectively, have attempted to provide some of the following services to women:

a. Information about existing educational opportunities
b. Nursery schools and day-care centers information
c. Vocational opportunities
d. Information on financial aid
e. Sources of legal assistance
f. Guidance and personal counseling
g. Career opportunities for women
h. Seminars on contemporary issues, e.g., art, music, family relations, legislation, writing resumes, etc.

Noteworthy counseling centers for women across the nation include the following:

a) Women's Inner-City Educational Resource Service (WINNERS)
The study group on continuing education for urban women (Boston), developed at Tufts University in 1971, with funds from the John Hay Whitney Foundation and the Office of the Dean of Jackson College. This center has published The Urban Women's Guide to Higher Education in Metropolitan Boston. (1973)

The guide makes a special effort to reach black and low-income women, so that higher education may become a reality, not just an unreachable dream. The guide stresses that the most important factor in making higher education a rewarding experience for women is group counseling where common concerns and problems are shared.

b) Miami-Dade Community College(Florida)Center for Women in Continuing Education.
This center serves also as a resource center for women in the community. A complete listing of community services, such as those listed above, are available. The center is also active in supporting local and state legislation affecting the lives of women. Their program has grown in less than five years from one seminar of twenty-five women to ten seminars each semester involving over one thousand women.

c) Department of Counseling Education, Arizona State University
A member of this department, Ms. Celia Halas, has had extensive experience in group counseling for women. Ms. Halas, writing in a recent publication of the American Personnel and Guidance Association, insists that an all-female group provides an opportunity for women to share feelings they would not share in a mixed group.[1] She says she has "consistently noted their value as avenues toward personal growth and awareness." Furthermore, she says, women have been conditioned to take a passive role in a mixed group conforming to the role of a submissive, not too bright female that society has assigned her.

Ms. Halas states that "the group experience gives the intelligent woman a chance to look at herself, her goals, and her achievements in the face of the double bind into which society puts her." She finds women reach a high level of trust and openness within their groups very quickly. Such groups have a lesson to teach the world about interpersonal relationships, she says. Whereas groups of people often work together in an atmosphere of competition, women's groups have moved to an atmosphere of cooperation and concern.

[1] Celia Halas, "All-Women's Groups: A View From The Inside," The American Personnel and Guidance Journal, October 1973, pgs. 91-95.

Purpose of Mattatuck's Program for Women

Insofar as women are entering higher education in ever-increasing numbers, it is the responsibility of educational institutions to encourage women to continue their education and to use resources available to them for their personal growth and development.

Recognizing this need, Mattatuck Community College is taking the "first step" toward providing personal and group counseling in attempting to best serve the needs of women in continuing education.

General purposes of the program included the following areas:

a. To provide women the opportunity, through group counseling, to look at themselves, their goals and achievements.

b. To provide an atmosphere wherein women's feelings, e.g., guilt isolation, self-blame, etc., can be discussed openly.

c. To promote awareness among group members that their individual feelings are not unique.

d. To promote increased self-awareness and self-confidence of group members through sharing of similar feelings in a supportive atmosphere.

Participant Selection Process

It was decided by the group facilitator that optimum group discussion would result from having a relatively small number of participants. Therefore, it was decided to limit the group size to eight participants.

Publicity for the initial group sessions was limited to the following approaches: personal contact by the group facilitator with individuals seeking counseling assistance, and word-of-mouth communication among interested students.

A total of fourteen (14) women applied for the group sessions and they were individually interviewed by the group facilitator. During each interview, the general group purposes were discussed to clarify the program's intent. Also reviewed were the discussion guidelines. It was found that some applicants were seeking an encounter group or other specialized program to meet their individual needs. Also, other applicants were unable to attend due to time schedule conflicts.

Those applicants finally selected satisfied the following criteria, as revealed through the interview process:

a) A mature woman in continuing education
b) Family responsibilities, e.g., children, husband, etc.
c) An expressed desire to meet other women in continuing education to discuss common concerns

d) Ability to relate to self and others
e) No previous history of serious emotional or mental illness
f) Signed agreement to follow discussion guidelines (See Attached B)
g) Signing the commitment contract (See Attached A)
h) Agreement to keep/six-session diary containing personal and informal responses to weekly group meetings.
i) Agreement to a post-session interview

Characteristics of participants.

As a result of the interview process, the following participant characteristics seemed to be present-in varying degrees-among all women selected for the group sessions:

a) Low self-confidence
b) Feelings of alienation and isolation
c) Concern about future employment and careers
d) Conflicts about fulfilling personal needs (selfish) versus guilt feelings about fulfilling family needs.
e) A desire to meet women with similar interests

Individual concerns expressed by individual group members included the following:

a) Family disapproval of women in continuing education
b) Family criticism that education will interfere with household duties
c) Financial strain of higher education
d) Difficult adjustment to being graded
e) Personal problems with family members
f) Sole support for household

Overall Program Development

As previously mentioned, a group counseling approach has been found effective for women in continuing education. It was therefore decided that this would be a suitable vehicle for the pilot program at Mattatuck Community College.

For the initial pilot program, it was decided to develop a six-week program, with each session meeting weekly for one and one-half hours. This time period was chosen to allow student participants some time prior to, and following the six week period for meeting their academic responsibilities.

Program topics governing the six sessions were: Developing Listening Skills; The Community College: A New Experience; Friendships and Family; Careers; and Sexuality. Topic selection was based to a large extent upon concerns expressed by applicants during the interviews conducted prior to the program.

The program was conducted during the Fall Semester 1973, on Thursday evenings. Initially, it was plannned to hold the meetings from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. However, it soon became apparent that this time period was too short. As a result, the sessions usually were conducted for a three hour period each week.

Individual Sessions. The following information relates to three areas for each session: purpose, key topics, and outcome.

Session 1: Developing Listening Skills

a) Purpose: To develop listening skills, a positive group experience depends, to an important extent, upon one's ability to listen with empathy, understanding and withholding judgment.
The discussion guidelines were used to assist in developing listening skills.
Each member answered the question "Who Am I?" while following the guidelines. This exercise on the first meeting was sufficient to set the example for future meetings.

b) Key Topic: Role expectations of family, friends, and society were discussed by each group member. In addition, each member had made a decision to attend college. The factors involved in this decision were also discussed. Also discussed were reasons why each member chose college, instead of other alternatives such as volunteer work or a job.

c) Outcome: Most group members seemed comfortable enough to share their feelings quickly. Many said they found listening skills to be highly important, and that they intended to apply these skills in their relationships with family and friends.

Session 2: The Community College: A New Experience

a) Purpose: To share feelings of mature women entering higher education. Serious concerns of adjustment to faculty, homework, and new demands were discussed. Most women feel isolated from family and friends who do not share an interest in college activity. Once it becomes apparent that others have similar feelings and concerns, they do not feel as unique or different. Some guilt feelings begin to fade, and are replaced with increased self-esteem.

b) Key Topic: Discussion focused on individual feelings on the first day of school. Fears and uncertainty were felt by every member of the group. Each member started college with certain preconceived attitudes about instructors, younger students, and class assignments and homework. Each of these attitudes had to be revised in light of their actual educational experiences. For example, instructors were more accepting of mature students than they expected; younger students did not reject them; and homework assignments were not the all-encompassing items they expected them to be.

c) Outcome: Women with two or more semesters of attendance were able to help new incoming group members by discussing ways in which they coped with similar problems. New students learned several alternatives to adapt to her own use. Because every member had experienced the hurdles of returning to school, a strong bond of common experiences was shared. Two comments heard repeatedly were: "I thought I was the only one who felt this way", and"It's so good to talk this over with someone who really understands my feelings."

Session 3: Friendships and Family

a) Purpose: Friends and family have an important impact on how we feel about ourselves. A supportive, understanding group of family and friends help immeasurably with new adjustments. Conversely, a critical, negative group of family members and friends can drain the most enthusiastic woman student. A discussion of relationships between family and friends is critically important in developing self-confidence and self-awareness. Women often feel guilty spending time on personal needs rather than on the needs of others.

Session 3: Friendships and Family (continued)

b) Key Topic: Discussion focused upon: What does friendship mean to me? How do I choose my friends? Of special interest to the group was whether we outgrow certain friendships. The idea of changing friends because of new interests and values causes some conflict among women. An in-depth discussion of the importance of friends in our lives was related to our role as students.

c) Outcome: This session elicited a high level of group member emotions and involvement in the discussion. The women freely shared many conflicts and some alternative responses they had developed in pursuing their college careers. Following this session, all the women voluntarily visited the group facilitator prior to the next week's session to individually share their feelings about this meeting. They all felt it had helped them to express feelings and also to discover that many other women share the same kinds of conflicts.

Session 4: Continuation of Friendships and Family Topic - Open Week Topic

a) Purpose: This session continued from the previous week at the request of the group members. They felt that a single session did not allow for adequate discussion of the topic. This, therefore, utilized the open week time, which was intended to allow for topics of particular concern to group members.

b) Key Topic: This session was directed toward family concerns. Problems such as conflicting vacation schedules were discussed. Social entertaining is also curtailed due to academic responsibilities, e.g., classes, homework, etc. How these and other family conflicts may be resolved were also discussed by the group.

c) Outcome: Various group members discussed alternative solutions to recurring family conflicts. The need for planning and continuous communication among family members is seen as vital. A supportive family environment was seen as crucial in meeting problems.

Session 5: Careers

a) Purpose: This session dealt with the many career alternatives available to women, aside from those stereotyped by society, e.g., nursing, teaching and secretarial. Also discussed was the many applications which liberal arts knowledge have in career areas.

b) Key Topic: How we choose a career and general careers for women were discussed. Emphasis was placed upon recognizing the transition from woman-homemaker-student to woman-homemaker-working girl. Transfer programs especially to four year state colleges were also discussed.

c) Outcome: Some group members expressed a desire to explore career areas they had not considered. They also shared insights into jobs they have held. Also discussed was avoidance of making prior assumptions as to what a job consists of until an inquiry is made into a specific job at a specific place.

Session 6: Sexuality

a) Purpose: To explore the stereotype of male and female sex roles, and characteristics. Each group member listed those qualities which she thought of as being distinctly masculine and feminine. These were then discussed by the group.

b) Key Topic: Consideration of the qualities of femininity and masculinity. Most group members thought of women as being dependent, sensitive, and highly emotional, whereas men were viewed as being strong, independent, directing, and leaders.

c) Outcome: It was the group consensus that men and women actually have feelings and characteristics which overlap to a great extent. Similarities, it was felt should be emphasized as much as differences. The observation was also made that differences might be more due to cultural expectations than on biological differences. The understanding of this similarity assists in expanding career possibilities for women. In considering male and female stereotypes, the discussion perhaps surfaced for the first time for some group members.

At the close of the last session, the women validated each other. By this I mean that they told each woman individually how they felt about the six weeks they shared with them. The comments were, for the most part, very favorable. Each person had contributed some unique quality which the others felt helped them personally to growing self understanding. Some comments were that one person was very sensitive, another had a beautiful sense of humor, and another had a childlike openness and honesty.

Only one person received comments which were less than enthusiastic. This woman shared very little during the six weeks time. When she did share anything, it usually was that she never had this feeling or that conflict which the group was struggling to confront.

Overall, the group members generally enjoyed sharing how they saw each other throughout the program. The recurring comment was stated that they felt they had found a group of close friends.

Summary and Conclusions

As previously stated, the primary purpose of this group was to assist women in adjusting to their new roles as students. Counseling centers for women in various sections of the country have lauded the values inherent in group sessions for women in continuing education. It was on this basis that the Mattatuck Community College Program for Women in Continuing Education was developed.

Participants for the program were selected after undergoing an individual interview screening and orientation to the nature and purposes of the program. This approach sought to select only those individuals whose needs were similar, and who would seem to benefit from this type of activity. Eight participants were ultimately selected.

The program consisted of six sessions, held on a weekly basis. Each session initially was intended to cover a period of an hour and a half. However, it was necessary to extend the session length to about three hours each session in order to adequately give attention to the topics. The session topics included the following: Developing Listening Skills; The Community College: A New Experience; Friendships and Family; Careers; and Sexuality. A special open session was included in the program to allow for additional topic consideration, if necessary. During the program, participants indicated a strong desire to continue the topic of Friendships and Family, so this was extended for an additional session.

A post session evaluation instrument was completed by each of the eight participants, in addition to an individual participant diary which was kept for each of the six sessions.

Program Directions

Based on this initial program experience, the following areas of consideration are offered:

a) There is a need to develop means of identifying mature women (both full and part-time students) when they register for college courses. This might include a special form, or part of the registration/admission forms.

b) Orientation classes specifically for women in continuing education are needed. This is especially crucial during the early stages of their college experience.

c) Expansion of group sessions from six to eight sessions seems desirable to allow for increased topic consideration. In addition the time period for each session should be three hours.

d) Scheduling of these group sessions should be in the daytime, as well as evening to allow increased accessibility for women in continuing education.

e) Possible group development based upon similar characteristics, e.g., single, age group 18-25, focusing upon career choices and alternative behavior patterns compared to traditional societal customs.

f) Effective publicity so that women considering returning to school are aware of the group sessions.

g) Provide counselor released time to give attention to program development and implementation for women in continuing education.

h) Development of appropriate resource materials in the field, e.g., legal aid, vocational and career opportunities, placement facilities, day care centers, etc.

i) Development of groups composed of former program participants in order to explore either additional topics, or to consider some topics in greater depth.

Post-Session Participant Responses

1. The two sessions which received the highest overall rankings were the sessions dealing with Developing Listening Skills, and Friendships and Family.

2. All respondents indicated their feeling that no topics should be dropped from the program.

3. Respondents generally made statements related to having found seven new friends, increased self-awareness, and more relaxed feeling in participating in group discussions, and sharing experiences.

4. Additional topics suggested for addition to the program included: motherhood, honesty, aging, exploitation of women.

5. Types of programs group members felt Mattatuck Community College should offer were: child-care facilities, speakers on careers for women, continuation of group counseling programs for women in education.

6. Effectiveness of group facilitator was seen by group members as an important factor in developing and maintaining a positive and supportive group atmosphere.

7. All participants indicated their feeling that the program was a valuable experience. Many of their reasons for feeling that way were similar to the responses given in question 3.

8. All of the group members indicated they would recommend this type of program for their friends.

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APPENDIX

A. Commitment Contract

B. Discussion Guidelines

C. Description of Session Topics

D. Post-Session Participant Response Instrument

A.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

PHONE _____

C O M M I T M E N T C O N T R A C T

Since it is essential for the development of our group that each member make the same commitment to the other members of the group and that each understand the investment of herself that she is asked to make, we shall discuss a "contract" with each other.

WE PLAN TO MEET FOR SIX (6) WEEKS --- ONE AND ONE HALF HOURS EACH WEEK.

We can count on each other . . .

1. to attend every session for the entire one and one half hours, unless ill.
2. to participate as honestly and responsibly as she is able.
3. to help maintain the spirit of discussion outlined in the "Discussion Guidelines".
4. to respect the confidential nature of the material shared in the group.
5. to evaluate this experience in writing as thoughtfully as possible at the conclusion (forms will be provided).
6. to personally remind herself, and others, of this commitment -- when, and if, a reminder becomes necessary.
7. to respect the rights of other group members.

B.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

PHONE _____

DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

WHEN LISTENING

1. You are to hear each other out. Concentrate on understanding the FEELINGS of the person who is sharing.

2. Listen with acceptance, openness, and positive interest. Withhold judgment or advice.

3. Please check back with the other person until she feels that you understand her point of view and feelings.

4. Encourage others to attend to their feelings and share them with the group, but don't pry or prod.

5. Always listen with care and concern.

WHEN SHARING

1. Be honest with yourself --- tune in to your own feelings so that you can share them with the group.

2. Be specific and personal.

3. Aim your sharing toward the whole group, not just one person.

4. You may be confident that others will listen to you, try to understand you, accept what you have to say, and respect it as true for you.

In groups, subjects and ideas are only vehicles we use to practice the art of listening to feelings and persons. What we experience from each other is more important than what we learn about subjects and ideas.

C. TOPICS FOR THE WOMEN'S GROUP

Keep notes after each meeting

Developing Skills for Listening

1. Who Am I?
2. Roles expected by family, friends, society, self.
3. Why college? Deciding to attend school. Background leading to this. Hopes, goals, aspirations.
4. Exercises to get to know each other.

The Community College - A New Experience

1. How did I feel the first day of school?
2. Attitudes toward teachers, other students, homework.
3. Feelings after my first class?
4. Encouraged, defeated, ignored.
5. Don't look for everything you want from higher education in classrooms. Take advantage of outside activities.
6. Have you encountered people who tried to discourage you?

Friendships

1. What does friendship mean to you?
2. If you have friends, did you choose them or did they get to be your friends by accident?
3. In what ways do you show friendship?
4. How important do you think it is to develop and maintain friendships?
5. If you plan to make any changes in your ways, please say what changes you will make.
6. Do we change friends as we ourselves change?

Careers

1. What are my goals and purposes?
2. What do I value in my chosen field of work?
3. What are the problems in this area?
4. Would you like more information about your career?

Open - Suggested Topics

Love and Sex or Sexuality
Communication
Depression
Values' clarification
Why Am I Afraid

Discussion and Validation of Other Members. Future Plans.

D.

EVALUATION SHEET FOR WOMEN'S GROUP

1. Please rank topics in order of most useful to least useful,- 1 to 6.

( ) Listening

( ) Community College - A New Experience

( ) Friendship

( ) Family

( ) Sexuality

( ) Careers

2. Do you feel any topics should be dropped from the program?

_____yes _____no

If Answer Is Yes, Please Indicate WHY.

3. In what ways has this experience helped you? Explain.

4. What topics, if any, would you like to see added to the program?

5. List services you think Mattatuck should provide to women in Continuing Education which are not currently being offered.

6. Please comment on the faciliatator. In what ways was she most effective? In what ways was she least effective?

7. Do you feel this was a valuable experience for you?

_____yes _____no.

Please explain.

8. Would you recommend this type of program to your friends?

_____yes _____no.

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APR 24 1974

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